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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the preferences of students of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) for the form in which a writing prompt is given. Subjects were 142 college students with intermediate to advanced English language skills. Each student was offered 10 potential essay topics, each containing a prompt in the form of either a statement ("Discuss...") or a question with similar content. Subjects indicated, on a five-point scale, their likelihood of choosing the topics to write about and other factors in their choice of topic. Prompt form was randomized, and no student had to respond to the same prompt in statement and question form. Analysis of results show no statistical difference in preference for prompt form. However, perceived ease, degree of interest, and potential prolificacy of prompt individually and as a group correlated strongly with student preferences. It is concluded that ESOL students, while perhaps not alert to potentially helpful syntactic clues in prompts, are nonetheless probably using appropriate strategies when given a choice of topic to write on. A list of prompts is appended. Contains 10 references. (MSE)

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ED 390 303

Essay Prompts and the ESOL Student

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Abstract

Recent research on writing prompts which fit the preferences of English NS writers has found that NS writers prefer prompts in question form (Brossell & Ash 1984) and that anticipating a good grade will positively influence writers' choices (Hayward 1988). Little is known about whether this applies to L2 writers, however. The present study surveyed 142 ESOL students for their preferences as to form of prompt, and also surveyed for other factors relating to their choices such as perceived difficulty of a topic. Each student used a 5-point Likert scale to respond to ten potential prompts. The data were then analyzed using ANOVA, correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis. No statistically significant difference was found in students' preference for prompts in different forms (question or statement). However, perceived ease, degree of interest, and potential prolificacy of prompt individually and as a group correlated strongly with students' preferences. It seems that ESOL students, while perhaps not alert to potentially helpful syntactic clues in prompts, are nonetheless probably using appropriate strategies when given a choice of prompt to write on.

Essay Prompts and the ESOL Student

During the past ten years, much research has been done on the form and type of essay questions or other writing prompts which ought to be used in testing situations to fit student preferences and maximize the quality of the resulting writing, where the students to be tested are native speakers of English. For example, it has been found that though they may not write better in response to them (Brossell & Ash, 1984, p. 424), students definitely prefer prompts which contain direct questions (Hayward, 1988, pp. 4-6); it has additionally been found that prompts consisting of a background statement and a statement or question involving instructions rather than either just a bare topic or an elaborate scenario also fit students' preferences and abilities best (Hoetker, 1982, p. 388; Brossell, 1983, pp. 168-169). And in a detailed study of native speakers' perceptions about a prompt, Hayward (1988, p. 3) found that factors such as believing that they would get a good grade or find a lot to say about a prompt positively influenced students' choices. Very little is known about whether any of this applies to non-native speakers of English, however. In a study of non-native speakers taking a standardized essay test in Canada, Chiste and O'Shea (1987) found that when presented with optional topics, non-native speakers tended to choose either the first topic or the shortest one, but Chiste and O'Shea were unable to either distinguish these two factors from each other or account clearly for the preference displayed. And Hirokawa and Swales (1986), in a study comparing students' performance when given prompts written in

formal or in informal language, found no clear difference in quality (p. 344).

The present study surveyed a large sample of ESOL students to attempt to determine their preferences as to question or statement form of prompts; for this analysis, then, the issue of form of prompt functioned as the independent variable while students' selection functioned as the dependent variable. It was hypothesized that ESOL students would match native speakers' preference for direct questions. As a supplement, in an attempt to address content of prompt in addition to form, as did Hayward (1988), students were also surveyed for other factors which might relate to their choices such as perceived difficulty of a topic or perceived degree of interest; these factors functioned as supplementary independent variables. Again, it was hypothesized that ESOL students would match native speakers' preferences.

Method

142 ESOL students at various New Jersey and Connecticut colleges and universities who were advanced enough in English to understand the prompts and survey form (as judged by their instructors), had some experience writing essays in English, and were willing to participate were asked to fill out questionnaires in which they rated ten prompts. Students were asked to read each prompt and then use a 5-point Likert scale to indicate the extent of their agreement with the statement "I might choose this essay question if given a choice" (Hayward, 1988, p. 11). The ten prompts in each student's packet were based on ten topic areas (money, animals, etc.) selected from Powell (1981).

Actually, there were two different prompts, an a prompt and a b prompt, written for each topic area, and each individual prompt was also written in two alternate forms, a question form (Q) and a statement form (S). For example, for two topic areas, education and health, the following eight prompts were used:

EDUCATION

1.a.S. Most students attend college because they expect education to improve their lives. Discuss this expectation.

1.a.Q. Most students attend college because they expect education to improve their lives. Does a college degree guarantee a better life for graduates?

1.b.S. People usually find that education changes them in ways other than just learning more. Discuss the effect that education is having on you.

1.b.Q. People usually find that education changes them in ways other than just learning more. What effect is education having on you?

HEALTH

4.a.S. "A healthy mind in a healthy body" is the key to fitness today for many people. Discuss ways to achieve this.

4.a.Q. "A healthy mind in a healthy body" is the key to fitness today for many people. How can people achieve this?

4.b.S. Since smoking makes people sick, not smoking is a good health habit. Describe some other good health

habits.

4.b.Q. Since smoking makes people sick, not smoking is a good health habit. What are some other good health habits?

Although there were, then, actually forty prompts in all, no student had to respond to more than ten, or to more than one prompt in a particular topic area. Neither did any student have to respond to the same prompt in both its question and statement forms. A typical packet thus included ten prompts, five in question form and five in statement form, with the order of the prompts randomized. As mentioned earlier, in an attempt to examine content factors relating to students' choices, students were also asked to respond to eight additional statements about each prompt, using the same Likert scale. The statements, all but the first based on the Hayward study of native speakers' preferences (1988, p. 11), were as follows:

1. I understand this essay question.
2. The essay will be easy to write.
3. The essay will be interesting to write.
4. It is easy to see what the teacher is looking for.
5. It would be easy to organize this essay.
6. I would probably express a lot of my own personal ideas here.
7. I would probably find a lot to say in this essay.
8. I might get a good grade on this essay.

Prompts ranged in length from 13 to 41 words (a considerably smaller length difference from that found in the

study by Chiste and O'Shea cited above, and one which turned out to have no significance when ANOVA was performed).

After the questionnaires were collected, three were discarded; two had been left blank and the third had simply been used as a medium for artistic expression. The remaining 139 packets were checked to determine whether any statements about any prompt had been omitted from response; 27 prompts out of the 1390 total exhibited such incomplete responses and were also removed from further analysis. The remaining data (1363 items) were analyzed using standard statistical procedures such as ANOVA, correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis.

Results

As shown in Table 1, ANOVA, a test to detect significant variance, indicates no statistically significant difference in the mean scores of question forms of prompts as opposed to their statement forms (since the computed F-Ratio [$F_{1,1361} = .06$] is smaller than the critical F-Ratio [3.85]) at the .05 level of significance).

Insert Table 1 about here

The eight statements additionally included in the survey to study content factors were all checked for individual correlations with students' statements of preference for particular prompts in order to see whether there would be any relationship; see correlation coefficients in Table 2. All the eight statements were found by t-test to have correlations that

were statistically significant with students' statements of preference for particular prompts, since all computed t values were well above the critical t value of 2.33 at the .01 level of significance, as shown in Table 3.

Insert Tables 2 and 3 about here

The three statements which correlated most highly with students' statements of preference were 2, 3, and 7, concerned respectively with perceived ease of prompt, degree of interest of prompt, and potential prolificacy of prompt. The respective squares of the correlation coefficients r^2 were .395 (meaning that 39.5% of the variance could be explained by this factor alone), .442 (44.2%), and .430 (43%; Table 4).

Insert Table 4 about here

Stepwise multiple regression analysis, a procedure intended to establish mathematical relationships among independent variables (Hogg & Tanis 1993, pp. 499-509; Woods, Fletcher, & Hughes 1986, p. 243) and determine whether their interaction or combined effect explains more variance than their independent action, was then applied to the eight statements. As shown in Table 5, stepwise multiple regression analysis indicated a squared multiple correlation of R^2 = 58% between students' preference and statements 3, 7, and 2 taken as a group. The 58% figure means that the combined effect of degree of interest of

prompt, potential prolificacy of prompt, and perceived ease of prompt accounted for that proportion of the variance, or that, in effect, the greater part of students' preference for a particular prompt can be explained by the effect of these three factors combined. Other factors as expressed in statements 1, 4, 5, 6, and 8 do not appear in the table because they contributed only minimally to the reduction of the variance (the computed F-ratio of each was well below the critical F-ratio of 6.63).

Insert Table 5 about here

Discussion

The findings of this study show students using consistent strategies to make decisions about prompts when they are given a choice, strategies which are likely to enhance their chances for success. Considering factors such as whether it will be possible to find enough to say about a topic should indeed be a good test-taking strategy (of course, it is impossible on the basis of this study to assess the soundness of students' judgment in these matters). The Hayward study found that the factor which most strongly correlated with students' preference for a particular prompt was whether they perceived that a good grade might result; other strongly correlating factors were perceived ease, degree of interest, and potential prolificacy (p. 6). These are the same three factors which surfaced in the present study as determiners of students' choices, but note that in the present study perceived good grade, while correlating with preference for a

prompt in a statistically significant way, did not show as strong a correlation as the three other factors (and, if added to the multiple regression involving perceived ease, interest, and degree of prolificacy, actually adds less than 1% to the total explainable variance). It seems that ESOL students, while logically concerned about grade, as native speakers of English are, have a more immediate concern based on language proficiency, whether they will be able to write about the topic at all, and this is what the three factors apparently reflect. Note that ability to understand a topic, a related factor which was not included in the Hayward study, only correlated weakly with students' preferences; apparently all the topics presented were considered more or less comprehensible by the subjects, so that the issue was not particularly relevant.

Another factor which correlated only relatively weakly with students' preferences was use of personal ideas, expressed in Statement 6 ("I would probably express a lot of my own personal ideas here"). This conforms to frequent stereotypes of many groups of ESOL students by teachers. In the Hayward study, contrary to frequent stereotypes of native speakers of English as being all too eager to write papers full of personal ideas, this factor was not particularly strong either. Native speakers of English and ESOL students may have more in common in this area of choice than is often supposed.

The findings of this study also indicate that ESOL students differ from native speakers in their selection of the form of essay prompts. Prompts with direct questions are preferred by

native speakers, perhaps because they consider them to be readily convertible into thesis statements (Hoetker, Brossell & Ash, 1982, p. 6). ESOL students seem to be unaware of this possible advantage, and thus show no statistically significant preference for prompts with direct questions. Perhaps ESOL writing teachers could usefully make special efforts to acquaint their students with the potential convenience of such prompts.

Conclusion

Prompt development, whether engaged in by writing teachers or writing test administrators, is a complex process which is nevertheless only partially accountable for outcomes. Other variables such as raters' criteria for evaluation and writers' background and expectations may also play a role. Nevertheless, the prompt is an important variable which deserves consideration in its own right.

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Table 1

Statement form vs. question form of prompts

	Statement form	Question form	Total
Sample size	687	676	1363
Total score	2240	2194	
Mean	3.26	3.25	
Standard Deviation (SD)	1.13	1.10	

ANOVA for statement form vs. question form

Source	df	SS	MSS	F-ratio
Between forms	1	.08	.08	$F_{1.1361} = .064$
Residual	1361	1697.6	1.24	
Total		1697.68		

Critical F-ratio: $F_{1.1361} = 3.85$ at $p<.05$

Note. Total scores were obtained by adding individual scores on the 5-point Likert scale.

Table 2

Correlation matrix of the eight content factors with statement of preference

	SC	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8
SC	1.00								
S1	.433	1.00							
S2	.628	.518	1.00						
S3	.664	.414	.542	1.00					
S4	.477	.484	.512	.408	1.00				
S5	.555	.457	.648	.464	.580	1.00			
S6	.545	.430	.543	.507	.455	.545	1.00		
S7	.655	.449	.606	.626	.501	.612	.658	1.00	
S8	.590	.457	.623	.532	.531	.605	.593	.648	1.00
Summary of data									
Mean	3.26	4.21	3.44	3.62	3.60	3.35	3.56	3.42	3.31
SD	1.11	0.92	1.05	1.05	0.94	0.99	1.14	1.06	0.88

Note. SC = statement of preference for a particular prompt. S1 - S8 represent the eight content factors in statements 1 to 8.

Table 3

Computed t values of correlation coefficients: Eight content factors and statement of preference

	SC	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8
SC									
S1	17.75								
S2	29.81	22.38							
S3	32.83	16.81	23.81						
S4	20.05	20.45	22.04	16.52					
S5	24.67	18.96	31.39	19.36	26.30				
S6	24.04	17.58	23.86	21.75	18.85	23.98			
S7	32.04	18.56	28.15	29.62	21.36	28.58	32.30		
S8	27.01	18.96	29.44	23.23	23.12	28.09	27.19	31.46	

Degrees of Freedom df = 1361

Critical t value at $p < .01$ is 2.33

Table 4

Squares of the correlation coefficients r^2

	SC	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8
SC	1.00								
S1	.188	1.00							
S2	.395	.269	1.00						
S3	.442	.172	.294	1.00					
S4	.228	.235	.263	.167	1.00				
S5	.309	.209	.420	.216	.337	1.00			
S6	.298	.185	.295	.258	.207	.297	1.00		
S7	.430	.202	.368	.392	.251	.375	.434	1.00	
S8	.349	.209	.389	.284	.282	.367	.352	.421	1.00

Table 5

Results of stepwise multiple regression analysis

Squared multiple correlation at various steps

Step	Content factors	R^2	Percent increase	F-ratio
1	Degree of interest (Statement 3)	44.2%	44.2%	
2	Potential prolificacy (Statement 7)	53.5%	16.8%	16.8
3	Ease (Statement 2)	58.0%	9.6%	9.6

Nonsignificant content factors: S8 ("I might get a good grade on this essay"), S1 ("I understand this essay question"), S4 ("It is easy to see what the teacher is looking for"), S5 ("It would be easy to organize this essay"), and S6 ("I would probably express a lot of my own personal ideas here").

Critical F-ratio: $F_{1,1361} = 6.63$ at $p<.01$

Appendix: List of prompts

1.a.S. Most students attend college because they expect education to improve their lives. Discuss this expectation.

1.a.Q. Most students attend college because they expect education to improve their lives. Does a college degree guarantee a better life for graduates?

1.b.S. People usually find that education changes them in ways other than just learning more. Discuss the effect that education is having on you.

1.b.Q. People usually find that education changes them in ways other than just learning more. What effect is education having on you?

2.a.S. Hundreds of years ago many people believed that the Earth was flat. Give examples of other earlier ideas that people don't believe anymore.

2.a.Q. Hundreds of years ago many people believed that the Earth was flat. What else did many people believe in the past that we don't believe anymore?

2.b.S. In the twentieth century, science has greatly increased our understanding of the world, but there are still many things we do not know. Discuss the possibility that some things may never be explained by science.

2.b.Q. In the twentieth century, science has greatly increased our understanding of the world, but there are still many things we do not know. Do you believe that some things will never be explained by science?

3.a.S. In some countries, people are not free to say or write whatever they wish because of government control. Discuss your opinion of this situation.

3.a.Q. In some countries, people are not free to say or write whatever they wish because of government control. What is your opinion of this situation?

3.b.S. Some people say that freedom is too much for many people to handle because they don't know how to use it wisely. Give your opinion of this statement.

3.b.Q. Some people say that freedom is too much for many people to handle because they don't know how to use it wisely. What is your opinion of this statement?

4.a.S. "A healthy mind in a healthy body" is the key to fitness today for many people. Discuss ways to achieve this.

4.a.Q. "A healthy mind in a healthy body" is the key to fitness today for many people. How can people achieve this?

4.b.S. Since smoking makes people sick, not smoking is a good health habit. Describe some other good health habits.

4.b.Q. Since smoking makes people sick, not smoking is a good health habit. What are some other good health habits?

5.a.S. Rats, skunks, and rattlesnakes are examples of animals which many people do not like. Identify and discuss an animal which you do not like.

5.a.Q. Rats, skunks, and rattlesnakes are examples of animals which many people do not like. What is an animal which you do not like?

5.b.S. The world has a number of unusual animals. Write about

an unusual animal that you are familiar with.

5.b.Q. The world has a number of unusual animals. What is an unusual animal that you are familiar with?

6.a.S. Some people say that people in the U.S. think about money too much and want too many things. Discuss your opinion of this statement.

6.a.Q. Some people say that people in the U.S. think about money too much and want too many things. Why do you think this is true or untrue?

6.b.S. A famous proverb says that "Time is money." Explain the meaning of this proverb.

6.b.Q. A famous proverb says that "Time is money." What does this proverb mean?

7.a.S. Joseph Hall said, "Perfection is the child of Time." Explain the meaning of this quotation.

7.a.Q. Joseph Hall said, "Perfection is the child of Time." What does this quotation mean?

7.b.S. A proverb says that it's smart to learn from your own mistakes, but smarter to learn from the mistakes of other people. Explain the meaning of this proverb.

7.b.Q. A proverb says that it's smart to learn from your own mistakes, but smarter to learn from the mistakes of other people. What does this proverb mean?

8.a.S. Different countries offer different economic opportunities. Describe a good way to earn a lot of money in your country.

8.a.Q. Different countries offer different economic

opportunities. What is a good way to earn a lot of money in your country?

8.b.S. Many people who win a lot of money in lotteries or contests continue to go to their jobs each day, even though they no longer need the money. Explain possible reasons for this decision.

8.b.Q. Many people who win a lot of money in lotteries or contests continue to go to their jobs each day, even though they no longer need the money. Why would anyone want to work if he or she didn't have to?

9.a.S. Many natural resources like oil and water are becoming scarcer and more expensive. Discuss this problem.

9.a.Q. Many natural resources like oil and water are becoming scarcer and more expensive. Why is this a problem?

9.b.S. Many people today are concerned about pollution of our air, water, and other resources. Discuss the most serious pollution problem we face.

9.b.Q. Many people today are concerned about pollution of our air, water, and other resources. What is the most serious pollution problem we face?

10.a.S. The first memory which a child has often concerns an important experience or event. Explain the significance of your earliest memory.

10.a.Q. The first memory which a child has often concerns an important experience or event. What is the significance of your earliest memory?

10.b.S. Some people seem to be better at remembering things than

other people are. Explain the possible reasons for this.

10.b.Q. Some people seem to be better at remembering things than other people are. Why could this be true?